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Bhakti-Sufi, Mysticism and Feminist Consciousness in Medieval India

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Abstract

The Bhakti and Sufi movement in Medieval India brought about a spiritual and social change in which the direct relationship between God and man was given primacy. The movement challenges caste, class and religious customs, and it manifested itself mainly through hymns, sermons and speeches written in vernacular language. In this way, the Mysticism movements became a sensitive and inclusive spiritual process in which the contribution of women is very important. Saints-Poets like Anal, Mirabai, Jinabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Bibi Fatima showed in their songs a personal and social protest along with spiritual love. These women not only praised the male-dominated religious system but also chose a spiritual path for themselves, away from it. They gave sacred and spiritual value to physical freedom, their agency in devotion and the daily work of women. Although these poets did not use the word 'Feminist', their lives and creations were a reflection of a natural Feminist consciousness-where a new identity was created by breaking the barriers of gender, caste and religion. In this way, devotion and mysticism gave birth to the concept of a primal female liberation in Medieval India, whose impact is still a subject of study and inspiration.

Keywords: Mysticism, Female Mystics, Gender and Devotion, Resistance Literature, Spiritual Agency

In medieval India, where the society was bound by patriarchy and religious bondages, some women raised a new voice through their poetry, devotion and literature- a feminist voice that was way ahead of its time. Both the writings and lives of these women were a kind of protest against social norms. Approximately from the 8th to the 18th century, the medieval period in Indian history was marked by the rich literary traditions shaped by Bhakti, Sufi, and folk movements. These movements gave the women a platform where they connected with their god without any mediator. Through this spiritual freedom, they challenged social restrictions. Her writings become her companions along with her spiritual journey.

Patriarchal norms have historically led to the marginalisation of Indian women writers, whose work has been undervalued in favour of narratives centred on male experiences. But Bhakti and Mysticism movements opened a forum where they could express their feelings, thoughts and emotions for the first time.

Ways in which the Bhakti and Mysticism movements encouraged women's expression:

- 1) **Rejection of caste and gender hierarchies:** Bhakti and Sufi traditions strongly emphasised that all people, regardless of caste or gender, are equal before God. This thought created an inclusive space where women, especially lower-caste women, could express their spiritual voice. For example, Janabai, who was from a Dalit background, openly expressed her caste and gender sufferings through her '*abhang*' (devotional poems). Mirabai is also a powerful example- she not only chose her own spiritual path by breaking away from her royal background, but in her '*bhajans*', She also questioned patriarchal society and marital expectations.
- 2) **Direct relationship with the divine:** These movements promoted mediator-less devotion, meaning a direct connection with God could be made without any priest, pandit or institution. Women could remember God at their own will, without any middlemen. Akkamahadevi is a powerful example of this thought- she rejected marriage and societal expectations and chose the path of spiritual marriage with Lord Shiva. This was a bold move in which she challenged patriarchal control over both her body and spirit
- 3) **Creative expression through poetry and music:** Bhakti and Sufi movements gave women a platform to express their spiritual feelings through poetry, songs and *bhajans*. Their writings openly expressed love, longing, pain and surrender-where women celebrated their inner voice and spiritual autonomy. Andal's poems contain intense love for Krishna, in which she imagines herself to be his bride, a symbolic rejection of arranged marriage and societal roles.
- 4) **Subversion of patriarchal roles and norms:** Bhakti saints repeatedly questioned the roles traditionally assigned to women, such as obedient wife, quiet daughter-in-law, or silent devotee. Even in Sufi traditions, women mystics broke the traditional purdah and gender roles and made their divine journey public, where their focus was only *ishq-e-haqeeqi* (true love for the divine).
- 5) **Spiritual autonomy and reinterpretation of religious texts:** These movements gave women the right not only to worship but also to view and understand religious texts from their own perspectives. Many women saints and poets reinterpreted old religious texts, where they took a more inclusive and gender-sensitive perspective. Chandrabati, a Bengali woman poet, wrote the Ramayana from Sita's perspective. In this version, she highlighted patriarchal injustice, such as Sita's Agniparikrama, her exile, and Rama's cold behaviour towards her. This was a bold feminist critique in which Chandrabati showed that women could question dominant versions of religion and history, and add their voices.
- 6) **Encouragement of collective spirituality:** Bhakti and Sufi traditions promoted community-based spiritual practices alongside individual devotion. Events such as *satsang*, *kirtan*, *bhajan* and *majlis* (Sufi gatherings) gave women a public, collective space to express their devotional feelings. This was a place where gender restrictions were relatively low, and women could freely speak, sing and connect spiritually without fear of judgment. All of these practices created an inclusive environment where devotion and spiritual experience were not the right of any one gender, but of everyone.

- 7) **Breaking of ritualistic boundaries:** Bhakti and Sufi movements openly criticised rigid and show-off rituals. The focus of these traditions was inner feelings, not outer formal rituals or priest-led practices. This was a major shift, in which spirituality was made accessible and personal, especially for women. Traditionally, Hindu and Islamic systems had many religious practices in which the active participation of women was either forbidden or highly restricted, like entry restrictions in temples, purdah norms, or male dominance of the priesthood. But Bhakti-Sufi saints said true devotion or love is with the divine, not any outer form or ritual. The *vaakhs* (poetic sayings) of Lal Deb and the vachanas (Spiritual verses) of Akkamahadevi clearly convey that the spiritual journey is an internal journey. In their writing, we see that they reject rituals, external appearances and patriarchal religious rules and say that true divine experience happens through purity of mind and inner surrender. For women, this movement was a liberating experience. Now they did not need to visit the temple or get the priest's approval. Their mind and feelings themselves became their temple.

Prominent feminist voices in medieval Indian literature:

Akka Mahadevi: The Naked Saint and Voice in Feminist Saint: Akka Mahadevi is considered one of the first feminist poets in Medieval Indian literature. She is highly respected in the Lingayat community, and her contribution to the entire Virashaiva Bhakti literature is immortal. It is said that she was married to Raja Kausika, but she left her husband when he did not accept her devotion to Shiva. Her worshipped form was Chenamallikarjuna (a form of Shiva). Akka renounced everything, including worldly life. She roamed around without any Vastra, covered only by her hair, a symbol of self-surrender and liberation from worldly attachment. Like the other Virashaiva Saint (in Lingayat movement), she also gave importance to internal experience rather than external affairs. Akka said that the primal woman's consciousness is more rooted in spiritual experience than in politics.

Akka Mahadevi wrote about 430 Vachanas (in Kannada), which are still available today. Her works are written in the language of love and love, showing a unique confluence of eroticism and mysticism—which was very candid and avant-garde for her time. The works are defined by their opening lines, much like classical Ghazals or Bhajans—

- 1) **Angangolli Rudra Shaktiya Vaasa** (The Rudra/Shiva energy resides in every limb of mine.)
- 2) **Naanu Ellada Nambidennayya** (I believed in everything, oh Lord)
- 3) **Arivu Enthanu Guruvilada Deseyali** (What is knowledge without a true guide?)
- 4) **Muddaada Mujaganada Avenna Kan** (That handsome serpent is my only vision)

In many of her poems or Vachanas, she opposed social bondage and male-dominated thinking, and clearly stated the spiritual rights of women. On the other hand, she attacks social inequalities like caste discrimination, male-female inequalities and religious dogma through her poems. For example, in *Angangolli Rudra Shaktiya Vaasa*, she explained (1) Divine Immanence (means Shiva's power resides in every part of her body, from head to feet. Her whole body is filled with divinity. (2) Non-duality (means Shiva and she are not separate, because her body and soul both have become one with Shiva's power). (3) Sacred Body (means while in many religions the body is considered an object of sacrifice, Akka considered the body to be a sacred place. Rudra Sakti resides in every part of the body, so

the whole body is a temple. (4) Rejection of external rituals (means when God is inside, then what is the need for an external temple or rituals? Devotion and inner-facing are the right path. (5) Feminist voice of Empowerment. Being a woman saint, Akka Mahadevi expressed women's rights and her spirituality in a bold way. She united Shakti (woman) and Rudra (man), where the difference of gender vanishes. So in the deeply patriarchal society of the 12th century, she emerged as a powerful voice of spiritual independence, bodily autonomy, and gender equality. Her speech raised questions like: What is the meaning of worship without love? What is the use of such a rule that does not take us to the truth? With this Akka Mahadevi broke the binary gender divide- for the soul has neither gender nor boundaries.

Andal: Andal or Goda Devi was the only female Saint-poet of South India (8th-9th Century), who emerged as a powerful feminist voice in Medieval feminist literature. She was born in Srivilliputhur, Tamil Nadu, later adopted by a saint Periyarvar. Andal lived in a deeply patriarchal society, where the voice of women was suppressed. But she challenged traditional gender roles through her love for Lord Vishnu and showed that men and women can be equal in the field of devotion. In her creation, female agency, emotional autonomy, and spiritual authority are openly manifested. Andal's devotional poems are clear proof that a woman can have full authority over her mind, body and soul. Her famous poems are-

- 1) Tiruppavai (Sacred vows or Divine observances). It has 30 Padyas (verses) which Andal wrote during Margazhi mass (winter month). Even today, this poem is performed every morning in Tamil Nadu and South Indian temples, especially during the time of Margazhi..
- 2) Nachiyar Tirumozhi (Sacred words of the Goddess). It has 143 Padyas (verses), in which Andal expressed her love, separation, dreams and devotion towards Vishnu.

Through both of these poems, Andal expressed an open manifestation of women's desire and devotion with complete freedom. Andal said she would not marry any human being, but only Lord Raghunath; and started a religious and social rebellion. Andal's language has romantic and sensual images, but this was to show spiritual union. She was a bold, emotional, and freedom-speaking saint poet who made her mark through devotion. Then she laid the foundation of a complete feminist movement with her words.

Lal Deb: Lal Deb, also known as Lalleshwari was a 14th-century mystic poet and saint from Kashmir. She left a deep impact on Medieval Indian literature. She is considered to be the oldest female poet of Kashmir. She was the first to bring deep spiritual matters to the common people in the Kashmiri language. Her 'Vakhs' are small, but contain a wonderful mixture of Shaivism, Sufism and mysticism. 'Vakh' means verse or saying in the Kashmiri language. She wrote more than 200 Vakhs (short, four-line poems). In her verses, people find (1) Shaiva mysticism, (2) Self-inquiry, (3) Spiritual knowledge and inner- spiritual devotion, (4) Sarvabhumi Bhakti. Lal Deb believed that true religion comes from within, and feeling God is not done in any temple or through worship, but from within. So, she spread the messages that renunciation of external religions and superstitions, and the experience of God, through the purification of the soul.

So, despite being born in the Shaiva religion, her messages are always universal and religious. Her verses influenced both Hindus and Muslims, Bhakti saints and Sufis. On the

other hand, when women had no voice in the society, Lal Deb expressed her pain, love and knowledge and search for soul through her words. Her perspective was that of a woman, in which the thirst of the soul and the struggle of the body and mind were clearly expressed. She became a revolutionary and a symbol of awakening. Her influence is clearly visible in the literature of saints Kabir, Meerabai, and Nund Rishi. Even her verses were later written in Sharada script (ancient Kashmiri script), Perso-Arabic script (for Kashmiri Muslims) and Devanagari script (in today's translations). One of Lal Dev's Vakh is where she rejects religious division, promotes unity of all beings and stresses self-knowledge over ritual identity- a radical message in Medieval society.

*'Shiv chuy thali thali rozan;
Mo zan hyond ta musalman.
Trukh ay chukh panun paan parzanav;
Soi chay sahibas satyam zan.'*

(Shiva is present in every heart and every being, don't separate Hindu from Muslim. If you are wise, recognise yourself--That alone in the true path to the Divine.)

Mirabai: 16th century prominent Bhakti poet and Krishna devotee, Mirabai made an immortal contribution to Indian literature, religion and women's consciousness. She belongs to a royal family of Rajasthan, but she left royal life and social ties and dedicated her life to the devotion of Krishna. Her devotion has the feeling of Sagun-in which God is seen with form and qualities. Krishna was not just God for her, he was a beloved man, a friend, a husband. Mirabai expressed her devotion and love through bhajans and kirtans. Poems are mostly written in the folk languages of Braj, Rajasthani, and Hindi, which are easily understood by common people. Her poems are not only literary, but are immortal as music. For example---

- 1) *'Payoji maine Ram Ratan dhan payo.'*
- 2) *'Mere to Giridhar Gopal, doosro na koi.'*
'Pag ghunghroo baandh Meera naachi re.'

All of her bhajans were against social bonds and a male-dominated structure. She talked about self-realisation and the liberation of women. Mirabai left all worldly bonds-husband, family and social norms. Even her songs emphasise that there is no need for any mediator or communal bond to reach God. There is a wonderful combination of simplicity, love and spirituality in her poems. She created her own unique identity as a woman in the Bhakti movement. Each bhajan is a reflection of her spiritual journey and feminist voice, where she chooses God for herself and the power of a woman.

Jinabai: Although the word "Feminist" is contemporary, Jinabai's life and creations were full of feminist ideas such as gender equality, rights over one's own body, opposition to patriarchy and self-reliance. Jinabai or Jnanabai (1270-1350 A.D.), who belonged to the Varakari sect of Maharashtra, was a leading feminist saint in the Medieval Bhakti movement. She was the disciple of Namdev. Her *Abhangas* (devotional verses) are characterised by a deep sense of personal devotion to Vithoba (a form of Lord Krishna), social critique and emotional intensity. She wrote in her *Abhangas*--

*'They say a woman cannot chant the name of God---
But, I, Jina, do not listen to them
My Vithoba hears all hearts, not voices alone,
In his court, no caste or gender holds the throne.'*

At the time, women were mostly confined to household chores, and religious and spiritual expressions were banned for them. But Jinabai not only wrote devotional poems, but also clearly expressed her identity as a woman. She used to say, "I, Jani, say...." a powerful sentence that proved both her right to write and existence. Jinabai was born in a Matang caste-which was considered 'chuhoot' at that time. She worked as a maid in Saint Namdev's house. But her poems raise a voice against caste and gender discrimination. She believed that all souls are equal in the eyes of God. She transformed her daily household chores like sweeping, grinding, and washing clothes into sacred devotion. Because she believed that all these works could be done as service to God. Jinabai rejected the male-dominated religious system and priest dominance. She showed that neither caste nor gender is necessary for devotion, nor is there any need for a mediator. This self-reliance was a fundamental principle of her poetry.

Muktabai- Muktabai, a prominent name and an inspiring figure in the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra. Her life and writings (*Abhangas*) represent a leading feminist perspective, with a clear message of women's rights, equality and self-reliance. She said a woman who wanted freedom from the rules of those times, and freedom not just from God, but also from the shackles of society. In her 41 works, she continuously spoke about the detachment from ego, devotion to Lord Vithoba, compassion for the downtrodden, critique of ritualism and pride, feminine wisdom, and strength. Her most famous *Abhangas* is "*Tatiche Abhangas*", in which she supports her brother Dnyaneshwar, when an arrogant yogi Changdev insults him.

Bibi Fatima Sam- A name was associated with the Chishti order in Sufi tradition, Bibi Fatima Sam or Fatima of Samarqand (13th century). At a time when men dominated Sufism, she emerged as a powerful female *murshid* (guru). Though she was associated with Hazrat Shaikh Fariduddin Ganj-Sakar. Bibi Fatima did not write any book herself, but her words, teaching, and life character are collected in Sufi-folk tales and *Tazkira* literature. Her messages are- true love is the only way to reach God (*Ishq-e-haqiqi*), self-purification, men and women are all equal in the eyes of God. Bibi Fatima provides a spiritual path to many women, which can be considered a kind of oral spiritual work.

Hazrat Rabia of Basra: Hazrat Rabia or Rabi 'a al-'Adawiyya (8th century) emerges as one of the first and most influential figures in the world of Islamic Sufism, who deeply expressed the theory of divine love (*Ishq-e-haqiqi*)-a phenomenon that is the essence of the vision of the ultimate and the ultimate truth of devotion. Her famous prayer-

'If I worship you from the fear of hell, then put me in hell. If I worship you with a greed of heaven, then keep me away from heaven. But I worship you for your divine pleasure, and then do not deprive me of my happiness.'

She showed that spiritual authority was not confined to gender and set a precedent for female spiritual autonomy in Sufism.

Conclusion:

The confluence of the Bhakti movement, mysticism and Feminist consciousness was a hidden but profound revolution in Medieval India. It gave birth to a spiritual Feminism in which women had full authority over their soul, body and devotion. Their creations were not just songs or poems of devotion but were a great declaration of identity, empathy and liberation. Today, when we try to understand Feminism, the study of these Bhakti and Sufi saints shows us that women's liberation is not only economic or social, but is also inspired

by spiritual consciousness. These voices of Medieval India tell us that inner voice and spiritual liberation are also a kind of struggle, which every woman has owned some time or another, in some form or the other.

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